TO BE WHOLE AGAIN

Mark 5:27,28
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Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the earliest and most astute observers of the American character. Scholars are amazed at the accuracy of what he saw and anticipated in our emerging national identity. Among the most interesting observations he made about Americans one hundred and fifty years ago was this: they are, he wrote, "locked in the solitude of thier own hearts." It has been exaggerated of course but the self-reliant, independent individual is an American hero of mythic proportions. Someone once noted that the prototype American was really Benjamin Franklin but that he will never make it to mythic proportions because he was too gregarious. We prefer our heros kneeling in the snow at Valley Forge, alone; or pacing the lonely halls of the White House, agonizing over the war within the Union, cut off from others, but sufficient.

That almost primal American celebration of individualism has served us well. From Washington at Valley Forge, to Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart, to Alan Shepard, John Glenn and Pete Rose, we have chosen strong self-reliance as our favorite model. In simpler times Gary Gooper gathered it up for us; quiet, self-contained, capable. In these latter days, however, the mythic characterization has become a caricature, with a not-very-attractive twist. Individual self-reliance now includes total, almost pathological disregard for other life. A recent survey to determine who the heroes are to whom young people look discovered that an unfeeling penchant for depersonalized violence has replaced simple independence...in the 1985 favorites -- Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone's character, Rambo.

At a more pedestrian level, however, de Tocqueville's observation about our being "locked in the solitude of our own hearts" is now turning up in what comtemporary analysts of our culture see as epidemic loneliness. A feature in the New York Times Magazine some time ago described a poignant new American dilemma. We are observably lonely.

We know all too well by now that ties of family and community which have held people together since the beginning of civilization are rapidly disintegrating. Twenty-Five percent of the people in America live alone. Most Americans do not live where they were born. Many of those who live alone, away from the place where they were born, choose to live that way. Many are the first women in their families to elect an alternative to marriage, homemaking and childrearing. Many who live alone are divorced. The American divorce rate has never been higher and is the highest in the world. One out of five American children currently lives with a single parent and the ratio will narrow quickly.

Those are not intended as value judgements. They are the objective data of recent and radical social change. And one of the clear results is widespread lonliness. How are we dealing with it? Notvery creatively, apparently. It has been suggested hat some random violence results from personal isolation and alienation, and sometimes is a simple bid for attention. Lonely people smile back at the television newsperson, we are told; others watch the Soaps for human companionship; singles bars provide a place where one will find other human beings to assuage

loneliness; massage parlors produce human contact for a price; dial-a-porn provides the verbal fantasy of intimacy; and more people than you and I might imagine dial "Time" and "Temperature" over and over again in order to hear a friendly human voice.

Business understands the power of the dynamic. The Times article pointed out that "The promise of companionship sells everything from banking services, ('You Have a Friend at Chase Manhattan'), to condominiums, ('You Can't Be a Stranger Long.')" The telephone company took direct aim, of course, with "Reach Out and Touch Someone" -- preferably in another state, during prime time.

Even the new, high-tech language of the 80's, is inclined to be distant and depersonalized. The author concluded: "We speak of 'networking' and 'interfacing' but underneath we're really lookin for people we can depend on, people who will laugh at our jokes and listen to our nightmares. We don't really want to interface with our networks. We want to cuddle our grandmothers and take walks with our lovers. Above all, we want someone to talk to." (Alone: Yearning for Companionship in America, N.Y.T. Magazine, 8/15/82).

Loneliness -- "pain turned inward" someone called it -- the result of social change and mobility; no respecter of age, sex nor station in life. It is a contemporary phenomenon, but it also describes a woman who appears briefly but compellingly in the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to Mark. Her hour on the Biblical stage is so abreviated we never learn her name. Her story is most touching, but in essence she is an interruption.

The main narrative has to do with a man by the name of Jarius whose daughter is terribly ill. Jarius has found Jesus, has told Jesus that his daughter is dying, has pled with Jesus to come: Just at this dramatic moment, when we are leaning forward in our seats to hear what Jesus will say and to see whether he will set aside the day's agenda to take care of the little girl -- just at the critical moment here comes a woman, a filthy outcast, shoving her way through the crowd and grabbing his robe. Her timing could not have been worse -- or better.

Who was she?

She had what Mark calls, with consistant clinical detail, a 'flow of blood'. Modern medicine would regulate it, cure it. But in her day it was mysterious, ominous, frightening, regarded with general disgust. For twelve years she had borne this embarrassing, humiliating curse. I have enjoyed suggesting to my physician friends that some things have not changed much, according to Mark's description of her dilemma..."she had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse." But what those words really describe is total isolation -- loneliness.

Listen to how a woman writer describes it. Madelein L'Engle has her say:

"I was tired from hurting,
Exhausted, revolted by my body,
Unfit for any man.
I wanted to rest,

To sleep without pain or filthiness or torment.
I really don't know why
I thought he could help me
When all the doctors
With all their knowledge
Had left me still drained
And bereft of all that makes
A woman's life worth living."

(The Irrational Season, P125)

Madelein L'Engle helps us see what is really going on in this brief incident. In addition to her physical condition, which she didn't understand, and which presented her with monumental personal, public and aesthetic problems, the woman was regarded as unclean, impure, by Jewish law. She was virtually taboo. She was barred from any kind of religious ceremony. Normal human relationships were simply out of the question. People did not want to be near her, were afraid, in fact, of contact with her. In her culture, belonging to a family and through a family to the people, the nation gave a person identity. This woman was cut off from both. For all practical purposes she was a non-person.

The religious problem is that Levitical Law, which every Jew knew, held that her condition was contageous. The law reads -- "if anyone touches an unclean thing -- or if he touches human uncleanliness he shall be guilty." There's the problem. Contact with uncleaniness renders a person not only unclean but guilty. The tradition was that the woman was somehow responsible for her condition. She not only felt awful, her religion made her feel worse. The idea is not far from the pop theological formula Job's friends tried on him, namely that one's physical ailments are a result of sin. This woman's culture, her people, her religion, told her she was unclean, guilty, unacceptable, unfit for human contact every single day for twelve years. She was, that is to say, utterly alone, and lonely in a way words cannot begin adequately to convey. It is no wonder that she avoided confronting Jesus face to face. It is no wonder that she acted so foolishly, crawling up behind him and grasping at his robe, in some primitive gesture of hopeless desperation. It is no wonder that she didn't make an appointment, describe her symptoms and ask for a prescription.

When you and I think about this story, we are troubled, stymied by the scientific improbabilities. The claim here seems like superstition, encouraging the kind of healing one encounters on television every Sunday, and in miracle cures available in back street clinics somewhere south of the border. "Stay with the physicians" we tell this woman and rightly so. Gynecology, not theology, is where this problem will be resolved.

Except this is a problem in theology, psycology, sociology. That's the point. This story is about a woman whose illness was more than psychological, and it is testimony to the miracle of God's Kingdom on earth -- in which people reach across the barriers which isolate and exclude, a kingdom in which all the taboos are gone, a kingdom in which people live whole, full, vital lives.

What is happening in this incident is that Jesus is dramatically ignoring a traditional, time-honored religious and cultural taboo. Again, let's listen to

a woman theologian on the topic. Rosemary Radford Reuther writes: "Jewish law regarded a woman with a flow of blood as unclean and polluting anyone who she touched. Jesus' reaction to the woman shows his deliberate discarding of this taboo, while the woman's own terror at being discovered in touching his garment reveals her awareness at violating the taboo." (New Woman/New Earth, P64).

Jesus reached across the wide gap between this woman and the human race and drew her back in. The power that went out of him, power she felt, isnone other than the power that went out of him, power she felt, is noneother than the power of God; the power of creation, the power that creates life out of nothing, here drawing a woman back into the human family, here giving the gift of wholeness again.

MadeleinL'Engle differentiates between curing and healing. Curing is science; healing is art, religion, gift, she reminds us. Dr. James Lynch, at the University of Maryland Medical School, has written a book under the intriguing title: The Broken Heart: Medical Consequences of Loneliness in which he concludes that "the rise of l neliness may be one of the most serious sources of disease in the 20th century." It has been noted that the touch of a nurse's hand can sometimes slow a racing pulse: that the simple hospital routine of pulse-taking often calms arrhythmic heart beats.

The Rev. Benjamin Weir, Presbyterian Missionary in Lebanon, who was released last week after 16 months as a political hostage, gave strong and moving testimony in a press conference Thursday morning to the power of God to sustain his people when they are alone. Ben Weir talked about the strength received when hostages were allowed to be together occasionally, to read the Bible and pray and talk with one another, and he talked about the power of God which he experienced because he knew he was being prayed for and loved.

What this incident is about is the power of God to restore wholeness. The real miracle and the real meaning here is that a human being was healed, made whole again because love reached across the taboos of culture and religion and touched and welcomed a lonely woman back into the human family.

There is, it seems to me, a clear word from the Lord here about the special love of Christ for those society has excluded. I don't think it is possible to read this text and not hear the mandate to the church of Jesus Christ to stand with those who have been shut out, to advocate their cause, to draw them in. That word is not always a welcome one. The tendency is to exclude, in the human practice of religion, to narrow the borders, to constrict the door of entry, still to condemn those who are different by nature or by choice, as unclean, unfit, taboo.

The word here is a reminder, as we deal with some of the toughest human issues on society's agenda, that the people who shut this woman out did so out of zeal for religion and for moral purity. They knew she was unclean and guilty. Jesus broke through that. The story is an uncomfortable reminder that sometimes it takes the power of God's Kingdom to overcome religious zeal and fanatical moral purity.

There is a good word here about wholeness: a reminder that God does not intend for us to live restricted lives. Human life lived fully is the object of the

Christian enterprise. Christ came that human life might be loved fully: that we might have fullness, wholeness in our living. That is a necessary reminder because frequently religious zeal turns restrictive and in the name of faithfulness human life is hemmed in, denied, constricted. Jesuit Henri Nouwen wrote, in a monastery prayer: "O Lord, you did not chose the lukewarm, the neutral, or the middle-of-the-road type. You called very outspoken people, able to experience ecstacy as well as depression. I thank you Lord for this comforting understanding. Let me have the courage to live fully even when it is risky, vibrantly even when it leads to pain, and spontaneously even when it leads to mistakes." (A Cry for Mercy, P.139).

"The glory of God", the early church theologian Iranaeus said in the 2nd century, "is a human being fully alive." That is the object of the healing Jesus did. It was a cure for her malady, but even more important it healed her whole person, it restored her to her full humanity, her wholeness. That is God's will for you and for me as well.

We live in a time which requires particular strength. As a church we believe ourselves called to be God's obedient people in a world that is not always pleased with that faithfulness. We Presbyterians particularly define and evaluate ourselves as a church on the basis of service rendered and witness made in the world. The text reminds us that Jesus was on the side of the excluded, the poor, the sick, the oppressed. It reminds us that there are a lot of people in our society like that woman. It is a reminder that there are between 6,000 and 12,000 homeless women on the city streets of Chicago every night. They are special to Jesus Christ.

But the text is not only a reminder to us of our responsibility in Christ, it is for us. At the same time the Gospel of Christ is a prod to our conscience, it is balm for our spirit. It is about justice and it is also about our wholeness, our salvation. In Christ we are called to feed his sheep and we are called as well to acknowledge that we are among the sheep who are hungry and for whom ie is food and meat and drink.

Salvation is the new life, the rebirth that comes from knowing that one is loved by God. Interestingly, the psychologists tell us that wholeness, health, depends on self-esteem, self-acceptance, which ordinarily comes from knowing oneself esteemed and accepted by others.

That's why isolation and loneliness is so very painful. The late Revel Howe said it beautifully: "the deepest want of all is the desire to be at one with someone, to have someone who can be at one with us, and through whom we can find at-oneness with all."

(Man's Need and God's Action, P.9).

So we conclude with the directness and simplicity of this brief story, this interruption in the larger narrative. The story is for us. Deep inside there is occasional loneliness, isolation, alienation. It strikes at odd times: in the quiet of late evening, in the middle of a sleepless night, in intense physical pain, inane cocktail party conversation, in disappointment with others or with oneself, in the frustration of not being able to tell another how deeply we love, and of course, in our being surprised by our own finiteness, our sense that one day we will be alone.

The story is good news because there were no conditions attached to her healing, apparently. She probably could not have passed a very simple theological examination. He didn't require her to take vows of moral purity. We don't even know that she followed him. What we know is that when no one else would touch her, he did. When all else had failed, when in desperation she pushed through a crowd and reached out for his robe, love reached across the divide and made her whole again.

The story is for us and it is about us. And it is about a Lord who loves us first, who comes to the place we are, and who waits only for our acknowledgement of need, of loneliness, of incompleteness, some insistant clutching at his robe in order to heal us. It is about a God who loves us so much that in the complexity of life itself, he stretches out a hand to take ours and to make us whole again . . . Amen.

God of mercy, break through our carefully constructed defenses, our busyness, our self-sufficiency, our cultivated ability to stand alone. Break through and give us the courage to acknowledge our need. Then give us strength to reach out, in faith, to you. Heal us, God of love. Make us whole. Through Jesus Christ our Lord . . . Amen.